

The changing demands of the tax profession and the impact on tax education

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Tax, by its very nature, doesn't stand still. Recent changes and developments within the international tax arena have brought into focus a need for a fundamental shift in how future tax professionals are selected, taught and prepared for this new and challenging environment. It is time to consider 'root and branch' changes.

This paper brings together several related themes. The management of tax risk is changing the mix of employment opportunities for in house tax specialists and the role of tax advisers (Billingham & Hansford, 2014). Tax authorities around the world are having their budgets cut and so have to 'do more with less'. IT systems can only fill some of the gaps left by experienced and well qualified members of the tax team.

In the UK the professions will account for "approximately 83% of all new jobs in Britain in the next decade" (Cabinet office, 2012a, p.1). The professions employ a far greater percentage of workers from higher socio-economic groups (NS-SEC, 2013). Initiatives to address this inequality have focused on creating a more ethnically diverse workforce and on reducing any disparities between genders, but these initiatives are focused, principally, on providing access to education and not on providing equality of access to the professions.

The upReach project is a professional development charity aimed at providing academically talented university students from low socio-economic backgrounds with better access to the professions. Less privileged students often lack non-academic aspects that are increasingly being required by employers and so they struggle to fulfil their career potential (upReach, 2012, p.2).

This study looks in depth at the upReach program working with partner firms. First trialled at the University of Exeter, the program has now expanded to include over 15 universities, creating a large peer to peer support network in addition to individual guidance.

Through in depth interviews we consider whether it offers students valuable professional experience opportunities not otherwise available. We review the concerns large organisations and tax advisers have about the current lack of applications to their internships and graduate programs as this shows that the currently targeted pool of candidates is insufficient.

The findings from the study show that the upReach program is likely to have a positive effect on increasing the number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the professions. Within the tax profession there is some recognition of the potential benefits of reducing the employment gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. However there are concerns about the cost barriers to implementing an adequate solution. Anecdotal evidence suggests that greater diversity within a firm has a net beneficial effect on the productivity and creativity of a professional firm, but further work is needed on this. Collaboration between the private sector, the government and the education system will be needed to enable a cohesive, collaborative and cost effective solution.